

**The Flint House,
Buckinghamshire,
England,
Skene Catling
de la Peña**

At the Rothschild estate
at Waddesdon, a new house
emerges from the landscape,
inspired by the flint found in
the surrounding chalk fields

A RAKED PROGRESS





**2 The Flint House,
Buckinghamshire,
England,
Skene Catling
de la Peña**

**REPORT
WILL HUNTER**

In 1874, Baron Ferdinand de Rothschild commissioned French architect Hippolyte Destailleur to design a country house near the village of Waddesdon in Buckinghamshire. The result, Waddesdon Manor, was a gilded mixture of tradition and modernity.

Completed in the early 1880s, guests were blessed with the luxurious novelties of central heating, running water and electricity – amenities that remained a rarity in many of the country’s grand houses until well into the next century. And yet beyond these modern comforts, the house was primarily concerned with forging connections to the past, essentially transposing an 18th-century Loire chateau to 19th-century imperial Britain.

Built on a large hilltop, the site was initially so bleak that, as Ferdinand recalled it, ‘there was not a bush to be seen, nor was there a bird to be heard’. Filmmaker Hannah Rothschild, writing in her recent book *The Baroness*, describes the Sisyphean scene of construction: ‘Percheron horses were imported from France to help transport a mass of building material up the steep incline, which included seven miles of copper piping, quantities of fully grown trees, hundreds of tons of brick and lead, and thousands of yards of iron balustrade, all stamped with the distinctive five-arrow crest, the family’s coat of arms, symbolising the five brothers sent like arrows to the capitals of Europe.’

In the 19th century, the English Rothschilds chose Buckinghamshire as the place for their country residences as it was only a short train journey from London. They established themselves in the Vale of Aylesbury, in a stable of half-a-dozen

mansions which, alongside Waddesdon, included Mentmore Towers, Halton House, Aston Clinton and Tring Park. Hannah Rothschild views this settling as an important part of her ancestors’ story: ‘The family wanted to show that they were no longer stateless ... By building those vast houses ... they were putting down roots and staking a claim to belong.’

And, indeed, the family is rooted at Waddesdon to this day. Strikingly, of more than 40 Rothschild houses built in Europe during the family’s heyday, only Waddesdon has kept its collections intact. And, though James de Rothschild bequeathed the estate to the National Trust in 1957, it is still run by Jacob Rothschild, Hannah’s father, through a family trust. Since he took over in 1988, the fourth Baron has embarked on an extensive programme of development, closing the main house in 1990 for a four-year restoration, curating modern sculptures in the landscaped park, and completing a handsome archive building by Stephen Marshall Architects in 2011 to house the family’s diverse collections.

However it is this latest addition to Waddesdon that is perhaps the most extraordinary. Commissioned initially as a dwelling for the curator of the archive (though now intended for family use), the house is arrived at by a private lane that leads from the Manor, past Marshall’s building, and onwards into the agricultural reaches of the estate. Though only several hundred metres from its neighbour, the house feels considerably more remote. While the older building gazes abstractedly down the hill at the younger one, its affection is unrequited as the house fixes its attention on the fields that surround it. The two buildings treat nature very differently: the archive is a more

1. (Previous page) the Flint House is designed to appear as if it has been wrenched from the earth, with darker flint cladding at the base disappearing into chalk towards the sky. The archive building can be glimpsed in the background on the left
2. The pair of raked forms invite elevated views of the surrounding agricultural landscape

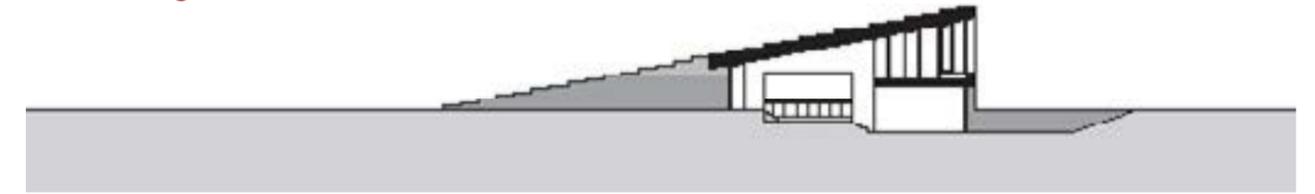


site plan

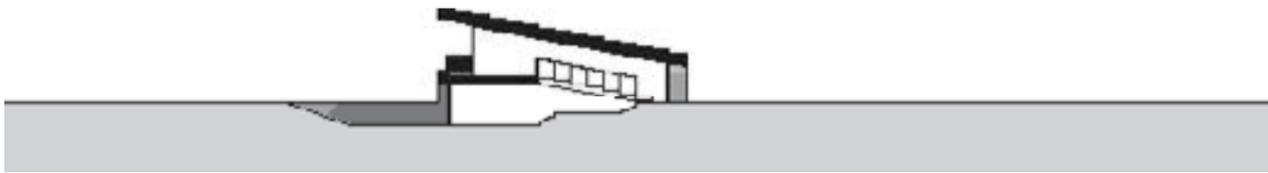
**The Flint House,
Buckinghamshire,
England,
Skene Catling**



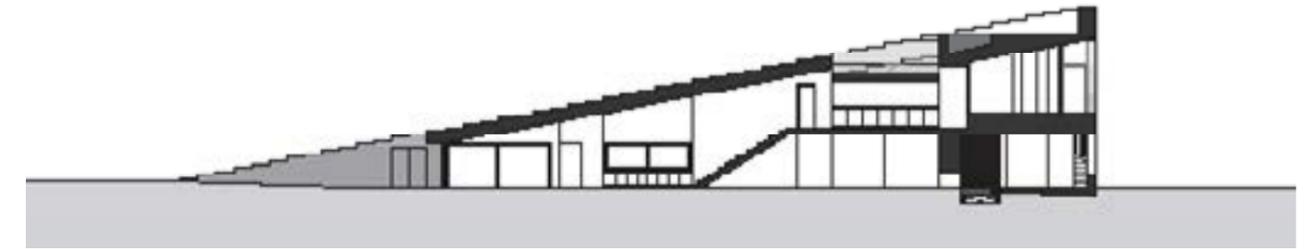
main house section CC



annex section AA



annex section BB

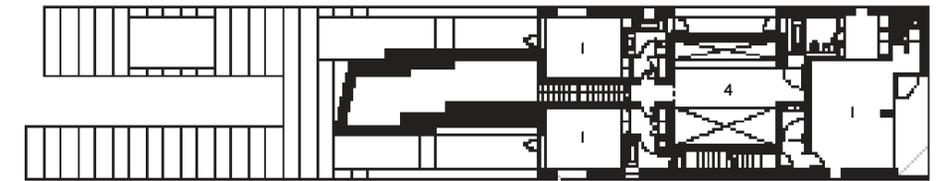


main house section DD

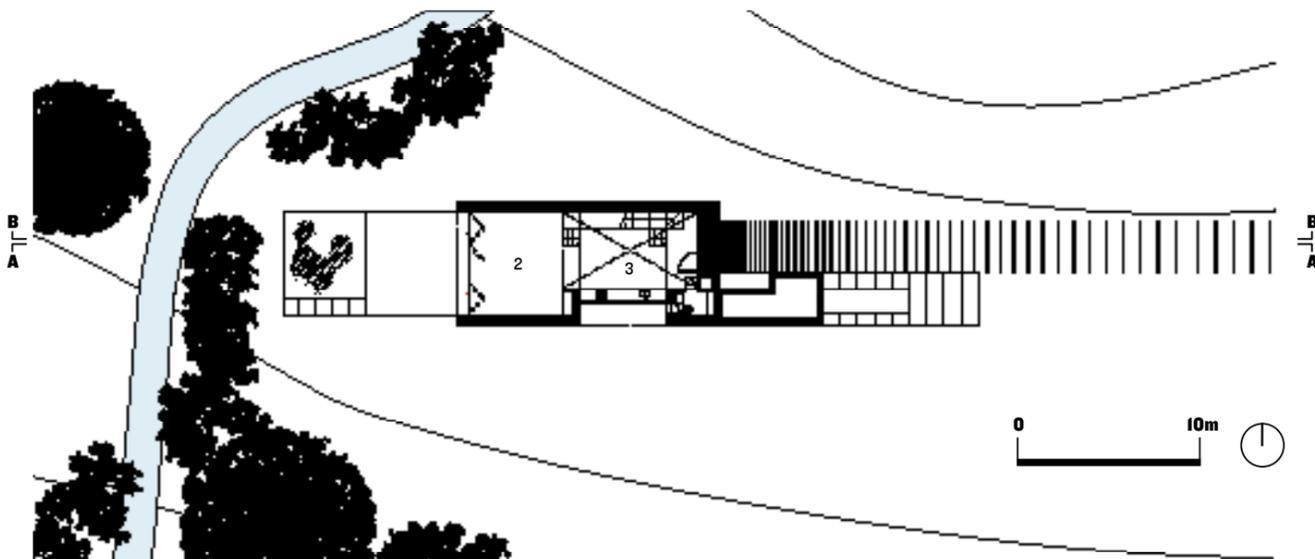
- 1 bedroom
- 2 sitting room
- 3 kitchen
- 4 mezzanine
- 5 dining room
- 6 main entrance
- 7 library
- 8 drawing room
- 9 study
- 10 grotto



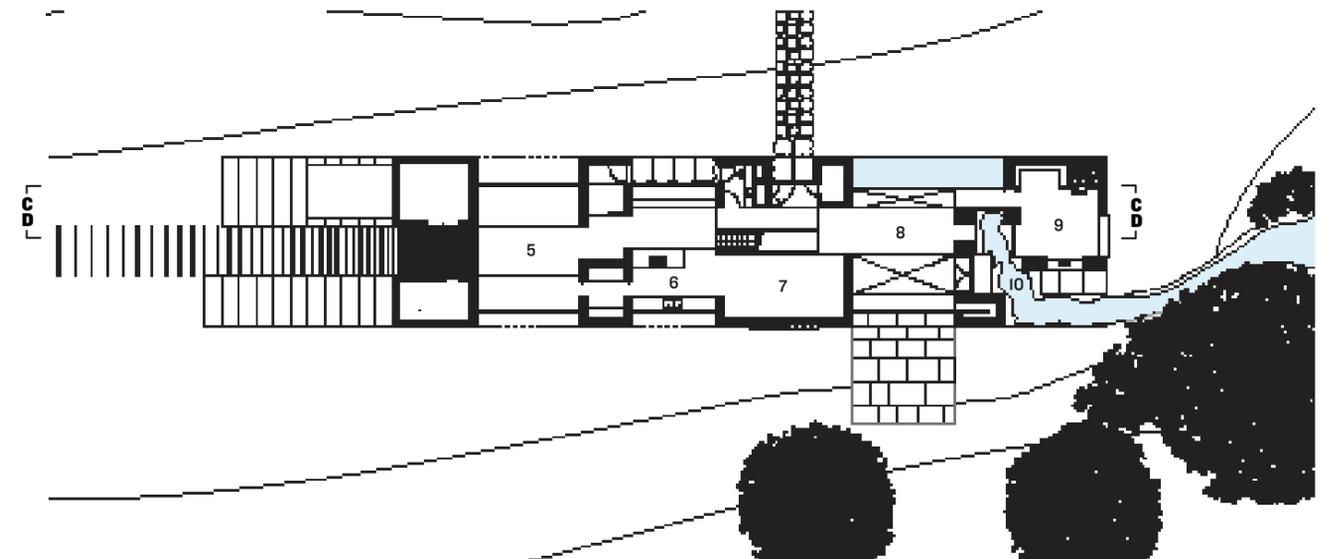
annex first floor



main house first floor



annex ground floor



main house ground floor





3 The Flint House, Buckinghamshire, England, Skene Catling de la Peña

Modernist conception, formally framing the landscape as something separate from it, to be admired yet protected from; whereas the house appears to have been wrenched from the earth itself and has all the inevitability of a geological feature.

Lord Rothschild asked practice Skene Catling de la Peña to make a response to the site and, led by Charlotte Skene Catling, a regular contributor to these pages, the Flint House is a reaction to the fields as she found them. Churned up into great clods, the ground was eerily covered in a scattered debris of flint – a hard crystallised form of quartz found in chalk. The site, she discovered, is on a chalk seam that extends from the South Downs in Sussex to Norfolk on the east coast. Furthermore, it is the topographical focal point to which almost all of the estate’s watercourses lead. There had once been a farm house there, seen on the first estate maps in the 18th century, but since its erasure the area had remained relatively untouched, remote from the will to reorder the bucolic English landscape on French formalist lines. ‘The site was a strange, still place, an anomaly of wilderness within its highly cultivated agricultural context,’ says Skene Catling. ‘It collects water, which supported these very particular mosses, lichen and ferns.’

When first encountered, the ploughed fields appeared in the architect’s mind as perspective lines that progressed to a vanishing point through the middle of the long, thin site, and this sense of a route through is something that Skene Catling was keen to preserve. Consequently, the house was split into two uneven masses, pulled apart, and raked to follow the existing tree line. The forms inevitably recall Casa Malaparte on the island of Capri, but instead of being about a

principal procession outwards from land to sea, the Flint House creates a reciprocal relationship between its two elements. Progressing to one of the peaked extremities gives ever-expanding views of the panorama; then turning back, the journey inwards, because of its sibling, is also curiously a journey outwards too. That the forms are uneven enhances the sense of disequilibrium, as if a body will never find a permanent resting place there, but will forever seek out movement between the pair. (How different the effect would be if they were symmetrical.)

The unique treatment of the exterior was inspired by cross-sectional drawings of the geological composition of Aylesbury and Buckinghamshire that reveal the sedimentary layers of limestone, clay and chalk; and the optical principle that paler objects appear more distant. From the base to the top of the buildings, the layers of flint and chalk fade through six tonal strata from dark to light. The lower pieces of flint are large and rough hewn, with big gallets embedded in the black lime mortar. As the flints fade they become more meticulously worked, snapped into smooth square blocks with razor-fine joints. Finally, the misty chalk appears on a different atmospheric layer to the earth and bears a closer kinship with the sky. Conceived as a carved flint landscape, wherever the main body has been cut or sculpted, the surface becomes terrazzo, which is carefully graded to follow the progression of the flint. The poetry of the exterior is a beguiling foil for a prosaic construction of concrete structural frame on a piled foundation with block infill.

The internal organisation continues the narrative loops found outside. Entering the main building near the centre of the long north-west elevation, you’re greeted by a large

- 3. (Previous spread) the pair of forms sit unevenly in the landscape and invite movement between them**
4. The large opening on the first floor is the balcony of the master bedroom, which terminates the promenade up the main staircase. The ‘river’ can be glimpsed flowing into the house on the left
5. The view of the grotto between the drawing room and the study, with the ‘river’ flowing through it



‘This latest monolithic addition is determinedly derived from the land itself. It is both of the earth and down-to-earth, a contemporary blend of the formal and informal’

wall (containing the staircase), which creates an informal vestibule open at either end. If you turn left, you pass into the drawing room, a partly double-height space which through large glazed openings gives on to the landscape beyond. Heading onwards, over a small bridge, you cross a ‘river’ that passes through the building, registering the transition from the house’s social gathering functions to the more introspective world of the study. Lined with raw nodules of flint, the grotto between these two spaces is animated by the elements of water, air and fire, the latter exposed through an unusual glazed opening to the rear of the chimney.

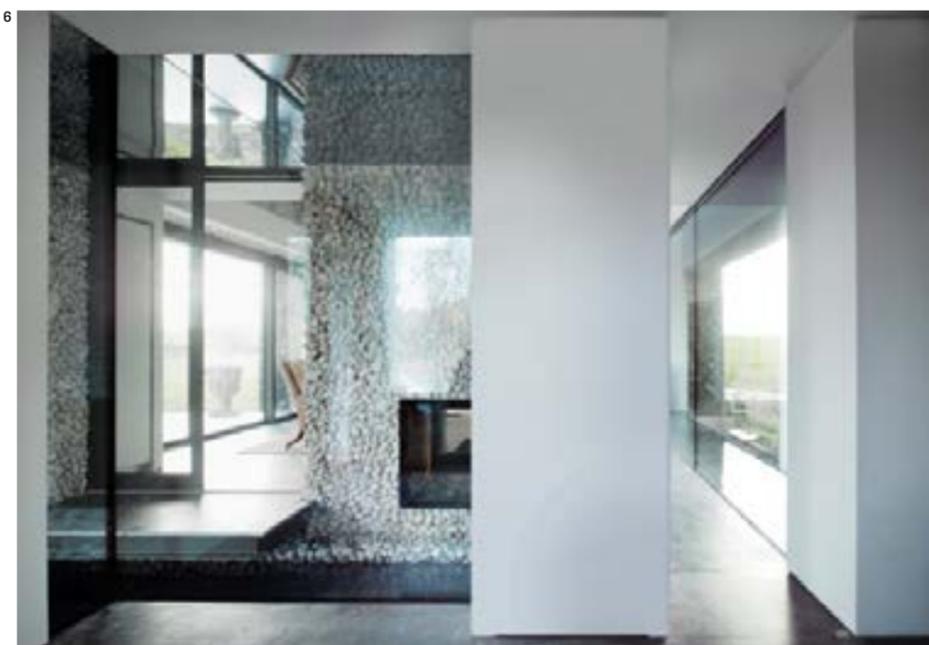
If you turn right from the entrance space, you obliquely join the long axis of the building, progressing through the kitchen to the dining room, and out onto the path that terminates at the annexe, which is organised as a studio, with open-plan kitchen, sitting room and mezzanine bedroom. Though the exterior path might suggest a strict axial arrangement inside with a singular route cutting through the main building, what actually emerges is a kind of disrupted enfilade, with the spaces entered on diagonal paths, often from the corners rather than the centre. This endows the interior with an incredible fluidity, as the spaces have far-reaching views into other areas of the house. Moving through the building provides

ever-changing vistas that compellingly synthesise interior with exterior, domestic culture with agriculture.

The main staircase has the closest affinity to the central axis, and this communicates its more formal role as a promenade to the master bedroom. At the top of the stair a small landing, winged with two identical bedrooms to the left and right, gives on to an interstitial space overlooking the drawing room on both sides – not quite a room, not quite a corridor – which turns right up a couple of steps into the main bedroom. This most private space is characterised by its tree-canopied views, though the impression of a sealed resting place is charmingly subverted by a secret spiral staircase that plunges down to the study, and the flight of steps leading up to a submerged roof terrace that surprises with its blistering white terrazzo.

Ultimately, it is intended that the house will be reclaimed by the mosses and lichens that the architect first found on the site. And, unlike so much contemporary architecture, this building will surely get better with age, as it softens with use and the patina of the natural world from which it emerged. As two adjacent examples of country-house living, the Flint House makes an intriguing contrast to the Manor. Both buildings are, of course, highly rhetorical; but while the 19th century building looks outside the estate for its anchor points, to the imported taste culture of French royalty and aristocracy, this latest monolithic addition is determinedly derived from the land itself. It is both of the earth and down-to-earth, a contemporary blend of the formal and informal. It is so rooted in its place, that it is hard to imagine it was ever not there, and it is impossible to imagine it on any other site than the one it is on.

**The Flint House,
Buckinghamshire,
England,
Skene Catling
de la Peña**



6. From the study, looking back into the drawing room. The glass panel in the back of the fireplace allows the flames to interplay with the water in the grotto
7. A view from the dining room, which obliquely takes in the kitchen and the drawing room in the distance. The stair leads on to a mezzanine en route to the master bedroom

Architect
Skene Catling de la Peña:
Charlotte Skene Catling
and Jaime de la Peña
Photographs
James Morris

